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Creative ex-pats: Globalisation and creative communities

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Abstract

It is well known within the creative industries that a pilgrimage overseas can be an important part of career development. All too often, however, the pilgrimage is a one-way journey and crucial talent is lost. Just as creative capital is lost overseas, the dominance of cities as the centres of Australia's knowledge- or experience-based economy leads to migration of the creative workforce from regional centres and smaller cities such as Perth, lessening the potential for those areas to sustain economic growth. Given the globalised nature of creative industries and the emergence of new technologies, this study asks whether migration loss could be turned into cultural gain. The study involves Western Australians living and working overseas or 'over East' in a wide variety of artistic fields. Participants answered questions relating to personal and professional connectedness, the career impact of their migration, future plans, and their perceptions of the Western Australian cultural environment.

Initial results revealed that most creative migration is due to a lack of opportunities and the appeal of larger markets. Despite retaining strong personal connections with their place of origin, participants' artistic connections were tenuous and artistic involvement was negligible. Implications from the study, which is ongoing, include the need to actively value and engage with creative migrants and to foster their continued involvement in the cultural life of our cities and regions. In doing so, there is the potential for creative migration to become a positive element of our cultural identities.

Background

Creative and talented people are the powerbase of innovation and economic prosperity (Glaeser, 2003). A broad definition of this desirable cohort is seen in often-misapplied concepts such as the creative city and the creative class, brought into popularity by Landry (2000) and Florida (2002), and in initiatives such as Australia's review of the National Innovation System (Cutler, 2008). Indeed, creative city models such as that employed in the US encompass a range of creative thinkers such as artists, scientists, architects, designers and engineers: creative capital generating intellectual property. However, the so-called creative industries are defined in many different ways, and this disparity compounds the difficulties associated with researching the creative sector.

Originating in 1997 from the British 'Knowledge Economy' initiative, the UK creative industries task force initially defined creative industries as intellectual property industries with their origins in individual creativity, skill and talent. Accordingly, science was included; however it was later removed, leaving thirteen sectors whose products were deemed to be 'cultural' (British Council, 1999). Australia is among many countries to have followed the UK model, furthering the unfortunate divide between the arts and science. As a result, the Australian creative industries are defined as "a set of interlocking sectors of the economy focused on extending and exploiting symbolic cultural products to the public" (Higgs, Cunningham and Pagan, 2007, p. 5). Whilst this definition is useful, it is perhaps Hesmondhalgh's (2007, p. 12) definition of the cultural industries that is most practical: namely those activities "that are most directly involved in the production of social meaning". The focus of this study is specialist creatives: individuals whose activities focus on specialist creative fields often referred to as core creative industries. These include architecture, advertising, design, interactive software, film and TV, music, writing, publishing and the arts.

Representing 5.4% of employment in Australia (Higgs, Cunningham & Pagan, 2007) the creative industries workforce is vitally important to Australia's economic wellbeing. Although it is known within the creative industries that a pilgrimage overseas is an important part of career development, the pilgrimage is often a one-way journey and crucial talent is lost. Just as creative capital is lost overseas, the dominance of cities as the centres of Australia's knowledge- or experience-based economy leads to the migration of the creative workforce from regional centres and from smaller and more isolated cities such as Perth, lessening the potential for those areas to retain their creative capital and sustain economic growth.

There is an increasing body of research focusing on the creative workforce, including people whose creativity is embedded in the activities of other industry sectors. However, the reliance on national data collections that fail to take into account multiple employment, which is typical within the creative sector, has led to widespread calls for research that will increase understanding of specialist creatives. Leading cultural economist David Throsby has echoed this call. Throsby's (2008) report encompassed the 53,000 people identified within the 2006 national census as working within the production or creation of art, and acknowledged that census data probably underestimates the artist population by over 50%. Careers incorporating multiple employments and limited employment opportunities within complex markets remain significant influences among the artist population, who respond to push factors such as limited opportunities, and, equally, to pull factors including employment, education, experience, industry, and the perceived vibrancy or 'buzz' of their intended location.

The potential for a place to attract and retain creative and talented thinkers is directly impacted by the richness, vibrancy and diversity of its cultural environment. The need for further research into Australia's creative industries workforce comes at a time of renewed debate about the need for a comprehensive cultural policy that complements the Australian

national identity and tackles the complexities of policy, funding and need across three tiers of Australian government. It also recognises that service provision accounts for approximately 40 per cent of Australia's economic output, an important and growing component of which is from the creative industries. Although constant repositioning presents challenges for the search for national identity, in the cultural field "the possibilities are at their most exciting, since culture is a set of shifting energies, always creating new formations" (Jose, 2009, p. 86). These new formations, particularly those emerging from globalisation and new technologies, offer some very exciting opportunities for the creative industries.

It is inevitable that many talented creatives will travel in order to develop their careers, reach larger markets, and work within established industries elsewhere in the world. Although this is largely accepted by the creative sector, the migration is almost always viewed as a loss. Given the globalised nature of the creative industries and the emergence of new technologies, this study asks whether migration loss could be turned into cultural gain.

The Creative Ex-pats Study

The majority of existing research on the careers of creatives is bounded by artform or genre (Brown, 2007). However, broad alignment across the creative industries in terms of career trajectories, industry change, globalisation, attrition, professional development, and the personal attributes, skills and knowledge required to achieve sustainable practice, confirms the value of studies that encompass creatives from multiple disciplines (Bennett, 2007). The focus of this study is the individuals who practice in specialist creative fields. Thus the methods, drawn from aspects of modified grounded theory, are sensitive to differences in creative practice and economic impact afforded through scale of operation and professional embeddedness.

Specifically, this paper reports results from a pilot study that sought to provide a snapshot of Western Australians living and working overseas or in the Eastern States of Australia within a variety of artistic fields. The findings have since been employed in the planning of a three-year study that seeks to further understanding of the creative industries workforce in Western Australia (WA) and to ascertain the importance of a vibrant cultural environment in the attraction and retention of WA's skilled workforce. The pilot study questions were sent out by email and invited respondents to answer any or all of the following questions:

1. Do you still feel a connection with WA? If so, in what ways?
2. How did leaving Western Australia impact your career?
3. Are you likely to return to live or to visit in the future?
4. What could be done to support WA's creative people and cultural environment?

A potential difficulty for the pilot was bias resulting from case study samples systematically selected from a limited source (Morgan, 1988). Avoiding such sample bias was a primary objective and was addressed by selecting participants who had not previously been involved with research projects conducted by the research team, and from multiple independent sources including professional networks and industry press. Written consent was obtained from all participants, and each approach included an outline of the study and an assurance of confidentiality and anonymity.

Inductive coding was employed in the analysis of participant responses. To ensure consistency and avoid bias, an independent observer also coded the responses and the two interpretations were compared. Aspects of grounded theory were then adopted to develop exploratory interpretations of data. These informed follow-up questions in which emergent themes were explored with the participants, using individual lines of inquiry.

Participants, who are cited using pseudonyms, included jazz and classical musicians, a producer, a composer and a visual artist (five females and three males). Although this was a small sample, the depth and consistency of responses led to a wealth of information. A summary and discussion of the results is presented in the following section using the three themes of image, creative migration, and artistic connections.

Results and Discussion

Image

The participants all felt a strong personal connection with WA, summed up by Sydney based jazz performer Mia with her comment: "Still feel like the laid back, sand-under-my feet, sun-on-my-shoulders West Australian gal. Wish I could live it and sustain my passion at the same time". Elise, a composer living in Berlin, was one of the participants who noted "so much incredible talent in Perth", talent which Melbourne-based visual artist Theo attributed to the "unique upbringing that the unique setting of Perth allows". The positive comments about WA and a lifestyle that is "the envy of most" (Theo) were counter-balanced by practical concerns around issues of brand or image.

The State of Western Australia covers 2.4 million square kilometres and is arguably the largest state in the world. It is also the fastest growing Australian state with a 2.9% population increase in the twelve months to September 2008. Of its 2.19 million residents, 20% live outside of the Perth Metropolitan Region (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009) and cultural employment is nearly twice as high in Perth as it is in the rest of the state. Whilst creativity is crucial to economic success, it is also a "fundamental means through which places are perceived" (Gibson, Murphy and Freestone, 2002, p. 174). Perth consistently scores highly in international liveability surveys: the Economist Magazine ranking named Perth as the fourth

most liveable city in 2008; and yet the image of Perth as 'Dulsville' is perpetuated within the media. Image was a subject taken up most avidly by visual artist Theo, who wrote:

> The cultural image of Perth to the rest of Australia is of a kitsch frontier town with little sophistication. This image is hard to transcend. The 'West Australian', 'Burkie', 'WA Inc.', 'Ben Cousins', 'Worst of Perth' etc. is a source of much amusement. Therefore this image needs to be addressed. … young visual artists feel the need to leave Western Australia as the cities of Melbourne, Sydney and, increasingly, Brisbane, seem to be the centres of cultural activities and venues.

The image of Western Australia has been much discussed in recent times. At the end of a seven-week residency in metropolitan Perth in 2007, Landry (2007, p. 9) called for the city to become "the most creative and imaginative city for the world" by engaging in imaginative, innovative and sustainable projects that would lead people to identify Perth with creativity, rather than Perth attempting to label itself creative. Whilst this is an important goal, creative branding is one of the few effective ways of controlling population loss, and as a pro-active initiative it would logically form part of the solution by ensuring that existing activities are seen.

The perceived vibrancy of a place is fundamentally linked to the visibility of its activities. Perth's city centre does not have the cultural hub of other cities: hence its cultural activities can be invisible to the uninformed. A study conducted for the Department of Culture and the Arts (DCA) in 2008 concluded that locating a comprehensive list of events was impossible without prior knowledge of where to look, and the study recommended the formation of a website hosted by, or with a direct link from, Tourism WA (Bennett, 2008a). Also in 2008, the DCA conducted 402 interviews throughout WA and found the Internet to be the most commonly used method of searching for events (DCA, 2008). Results of a simultaneous survey conducted by the City of Perth suggested that image and vibrancy are a

concern also for local residents. The survey, which attracted 600 responses, identified fifteen major issues, including: "The need to focus on all aspects of the visitor experience to create a real 'buzz' for both interstate and overseas visitors" (City of Perth, 2009, n. p). Culture and the arts have a key role to play in this.

Creative Migration

Not surprisingly, results from the pilot study suggest that most creative migration is due to a lack of local opportunities and the appeal of larger markets: "I made some attempts to find employment with Western Australian film and television companies but quickly found that there were very few opportunities. … When I moved to Los Angeles I had hundreds more job options available to me" (Greta, producer living in California). David, a professional trombonist, reflected: "By moving to Melbourne, I was exposed to a greater population of musicians, venues and audiences, therefore my performance opportunities increased. Being geographically closer to other cities also opens up more performance opportunities".

Perth's low density, geographic isolation and spatial distribution of arts activity are compounded by its population size in comparison with the artists' chosen locations (for example, 1.5 million people in Perth, 3.5 million in Berlin, and 3.8 million in Melbourne). Indeed, for some respondents the decision to move was purely a matter of scale: Carla, now a lead opera singer, gained continuous employment once she migrated to Germany. Writing from Berlin, composer and jazz singer Elise suggested: "I'm sure I will visit Perth again but it is difficult to live there because of its limited venues and opportunities to play live". Berlin is a particularly good example of a city that has embraced creative industry activities since the Cold War era, utilising old buildings to establish studio spaces and a vibrant cultural sector: "Berlin's government and its people have taken a bet on creativity by plugging the gap in the economy as the city is rebuilt, and it is paying off" (Heath, 2009, p. 140).

Aligned with this was the observation from Jenny, a Melbourne-based classical pianist, that "the population of Perth and lack of proximity to fairly large regional towns and centres" can render full-time arts practice impossible and confine it to what Theo described as "a fringe activity". As David explained, many WA artists "have to work other jobs to fund the time for their 'passion', however in large cities many artists can work full time". Whilst local critical mass is not something that can be quickly developed, participants also highlighted the importance of connecting with national or global industry networks, and the difficulties of doing this is from WA.

Most of the respondents alluded to the 'invisibility' or professional isolation of living in WA: "it is very difficult to transcend the regionalism and participate in the national conversation about visual culture". Isolation was aligned with the need to be aware of opportunities as they arise, and the research suggests that there is a case for strategies to facilitate active links between WA creatives and global opportunities and networks. As Greta wrote from California, some of the solutions could be quite simple: "through my UCLA writing course … I received a weekly email with a hundred or so entry level jobs". Similarly, Jenny noted a Melbourne radio station (3 MBS) that supports a resident artist program and weekly lunchtime classical music concerts at which young performers and performance students perform live-to-air from the studio, providing "invaluable experience, something to work for and, as far as I can see, is mutually beneficial to all involved". It is useful to consider the impact of migration on creatives who migrate early in the professional careers. Visual artist Theo made the point that the smaller market in Perth can provide valuable opportunities for early career development: "Ironically, I feel that I missed out on opportunities that colleagues in Perth were allowed, in particular to grants and commissions. Therefore my early development through opportunities as an artist may have been stunted".

Recognising that "Perth has an astonishing reputation for its production of world-class artists", trombonist David called for the State Government to "continue and expand its financial support of the arts". WA is home to some enviable funding strategies that could provide templates for multi-arts initiatives. For example, the State Government-funded Contemporary Music Program (CMP) has, since its inception in 2001, enjoyed significant success in supporting the WA music industry. Tangible results of the CMP include increased sales, airplay and local audience levels, and, at the individual level, more sustainable careers for WA musicians (Bennett, 2008b). In short, much could be done to foster the practice of resident creatives and to reclaim or retain links with those living elsewhere.

Artistic Connections

Despite a desire among participants to be artistically involved in WA activities, artistic connections were tenuous and artistic involvement was negligible. Mia, a jazz performer living in Melbourne, had attempted to remain involved: "I used to try to organise gigs but it became too difficult for effort versus return". Perth, she wrote, needs:

> Promotion of West Australian artists to greater Australia and the world. I've always felt some sort of national 'gig circuit' or 'exchange' performance set up would stimulate performers and audience alike. Some sort of public creative 'hub' like you might find at somewhere like Federation Square in Melbourne ... where general public are regular exposed to music, art, acts they might not normally get to see/hear.

Similarly, Gavin, a big band leader living in Norway, wrote of Western Australia's "extremely high level of musicianship", but he conceded: "I won't be living there again. As much as I would like to, there are too many limitations".

Several participants noted that in Western Australia it is necessary to create and manage one's own performance or exhibition opportunities and that there is little support for

artists to do this, particularly in the formative stages of their careers. Jenny (pianist) had tried to organise concerts in order to remain involved in the WA arts scene; however, she had found that: "if one wants to stage anything, it has to be individually organised, managed and put on, without support". The notion of a touring circuit is fundamental to understanding the interconnected and layered nature of creative industries activity. Touring circuits connect venues to audiences and, once established, they can provide the economic basis for continued audience development. In turn, regular audience support underpins the potential for venues to maintain a financially viable program of performances or exhibitions. Touring circuits also expose local artists to touring acts and provide an entry point to the industry. As such, they form an important part of intra-regional and inter-regional artistic connectedness and could be further developed within and beyond WA.

Two respondents believed that their migration had resulted in them being less than welcome within the WA arts scene. Again reflecting the need for inter- and intra-connectedness, Jazz singer Elise wrote of the "open, enthusiastic attitude" she had encountered in other cities and suggested: "community, students, teachers, and people who just want to be involved need to stick together, especially in a small city like Perth".

One of the obvious strategies in retaining artists— physically or artistically—is to connect them to their professional fields whilst they are still training. Although this occurs frequently within some of the visual arts and within contemporary music, in other fields it is often the case that new graduates have little or no professional connections. California-based producer, Greta, wrote:

> When I graduated I wasn't given any instruction on how to use my film studies in Western Australia. In three years of university I hadn't met anyone who was actually working in production or post-production in Perth. I didn't study Western Australian films, attend any local film festivals or learn anything about making films or television

in small creative communities like WA. Essentially I knew nothing about the workings of the Perth entertainment industry and, as a result, quickly decided to move to away from the State.

Closing Comments

This study reveals findings in three key areas. Firstly, creative branding could draw upon both resident and 'ex-pat' creatives to form a picture of vibrancy. As discussed earlier, the perceived vibrancy of a place is critical to its ability to attract and retain creative and innovative people. In fact, communities "are to be distinguished not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (Anderson, 1983, p. 6). Using the examples of Australian-derived Village Roadshow and Hopscotch Films director Troy Lum, O'Neil (2009, p. 32) observes that the "commercial success of Australian companies in the creative economy is scarcely acknowledged here"; yet the success of such creative migrants should be paramount to how a place is imagined. The responses of this small sample suggest that many creative migrants would welcome such involvement.

Secondly, creative migration is largely due to a lack of local opportunities and the appeal of larger markets often located within larger population centres. Whilst the geographic isolation of cities such as Perth is an obvious factor in professional isolation, technology and improved communication could overcome many hurdles. Typical of many Western settings, the WA creative industries are characterised by sparse, sometimes problematic communications between a multiplicity of networks including venues and regulatory bodies; regional and metropolitan festivals; and between metropolitan and geographically dispersed regions. This fragmented communication is typical of an industry that is founded on grass roots community based social networks. It is at this level that new initiatives could assist in

laying the economic foundation for a growing, profitable and more vibrant sector that could maximise market potential and heighten the visibility of creative industry activities.

Finally, the findings suggest there to be a lack of artistic connection between creative migrants and Western Australia. Anecdotal evidence would suggest that this situation is common to many places. There is potential to actively engage with and value creative migrants, and to foster their continued involvement as active agents in the cultural life and image of our cities and regions. A viable regional network of venues and communities could, for example, open up regional areas to metropolitan touring acts or exhibitions, and provide an expanded base of diverse talent and content for metropolitan areas. A targeted program of virtual collaborations could go a long way towards connecting artists and community regardless of their location, repositioning creative migration as a positive element of cultural identity and creative branding. Making connections with the local arts scene during training is logical not only in exposing students to local opportunities, but in forging the longer-term links that may foster involvement regardless of location.

The pilot study created a snapshot of the circumstances behind creative migration and highlighted the potential for utilising globalisation and new technologies to strengthen artistic connections between creatives and their place of origin. Retaining its focus on the work and location of specialist creatives, the next phase of research will assess the significance of cultural vibrancy in the attraction and retention of a broad range of creative and innovative thinkers. It is hoped that the study will make a useful contribution to research that problematises cultural economies and urban and regional change including labour migration, and policy.

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